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ABSTRACT

A review of relevant research reveals the general characteristics of a test of oral communication performance, some specific characteristics of testing programs, and some directions that future performance testing should take. Characteristics of tests of oral communication performance are as follows: (1) students should be able to apply the skills and knowledge they have learned, (2) performance should involve completion of a prespecified task according to prespecified criteria in the context of real or simulated assessment exercises, (3) whatever task or product is required by the exercises must be observable and measurable, and (4) the performance must be directly observed and rated by a trained, qualified judge. Specific testing programs take a variety of forms, such as teacher assessment of a variety of communication activities in the classroom, trained rater assessment of student interviews or public speeches, or an assessment of student oral communication in a combination of activities. The experience gained from large scale assessment programs suggests that efforts be directed in defining communication competence, selecting kinds of student performances, utilizing appropriate criteria, working for validity, and working for reliability. (EL)

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ASSESSING ORAL COMMUNICATION PERFORMANCE SKILLS

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Scholars, writers, and practitioners are devoting an all-time high level of attention to the task of developing sophisticated yet practical means of assessing oral communication skills. The "accountability" movement of the early 70's precipitated this interest, but it was given a much greater shot in the arm a few years later by the "Basic Skills" movement which was punctuated in 1978 by the establishment of a new Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The purpose of Title II was " . . . to improve instruction so that all children are able to master the basic skills of reading, mathematics, and effective communication, both written and oral." So whereas reading and writing have enjoyed almost exclusive attention of curriculum developers and testers for decades, now we find a flurry of activity in establishing oral communication curricula and developing means of assessing student learning. The Speech Communication Association established a Task Force on Assessment and Testing in 1979 which authorized a committee to conduct a national survey of state practices in speaking and listening skill assessments. The report of this committee appears in Communication Education in April 1982.[1] Another SCA committee conducted a review and a critique of procedures for assessing speaking and listening skills among preschool through grade twelve students and reported their findings in Communication Education in October 1982.[2]

Definitions of Oral Communication Competence

Most theorists agree that the competent oral communicator must be able to demonstrate both cognitive and behavioral skills. Hymes, for example, claims that communication competence is understood to be dependent upon both knowledge and usage.[3] Likewise, Wiemann and Backlund argue that both nonbehavioral(cognitive) aspects of the communication process and specific references to actual communication behavior are necessary for a complete understanding of the communication behavior of individuals.[4]

While I agree that both the cognitive and the behavioral are important dimensions to the competent communicator, this paper focuses only upon the latter. Measurement scholars and practitioners have focused their measurement research and development efforts on large-scale assessments which best lend themselves to testing cognitive skills by the use of a paper and pencil format.[5] Consequently, we are quite sophisticated in our use of this testing format, but we are much less mature in our testing of "performance" skills. Thus, in this paper we look at general characteristics of a test of oral communication performance, some specific characteristics of testing programs, and some directions which future performance testing in oral communication should take.

General Characteristics of Testing Programs

A number of experts have identified characteristics of a test of oral communication performance. Stiggins and Bridgeford identify four important characteristics of what they call "performance tests." These are (1) students are called upon to apply the skills and knowledge they have learned, (2) performance involves completion of a prespecified task according to prespecified criteria in the context of real or simulated assessment exercises, (3) whatever task or product is required by the exercises must be observable and measurable, and (4) the performance must be directly observed and rated by a trained, qualified judge.[6]

Tests of oral communication are most frequently used for the purpose of fulfilling a requirement for H.S. graduation, as states are jumping on the minimum competency bandwagon. But there is also some use of testing on college campuses for purposes of placement or for awarding credit to a student for a course she/he does not have to take.

Specific Characteristics of Testing Programs

A valid test of oral communication competence must necessarily involve the student in one or more speech performances which are considered representative of communication in its many forms and situations. Programs presently in use take a variety of forms: some programs involve the regular classroom teacher assessing students' speaking skills as students participate in a variety of communication activities which are central to normal involvement in classroom activities; some programs involve a trained rater assessing students as they participate in an interview; some programs involve a rater assessing students on the basis of a public speech; some programs involve assessing students' oral communication in a combination of activities.

Varied Classroom Activities. In 1979, the state of Massachusetts began a program of assessment of students' oral communication competencies by means of a "teacher observation" approach. Two teachers who have a student in class rate the student's typical speaking performance during classroom activity over a period of time, including observations on how she/he asks and responds to questions, explains how to do something, gives a report to the class, or talks with other students in discussion groups.[7] Because of reliability problems, Massachusetts has recently suspended this program in favor of a more structured exercise which I will discuss later.

Another state-wide program in which oral communication competence is assessed as the student participates in classroom activities is administered by the Vermont State Board of Education Association. As of 1981, competency in speaking is one of several competencies which is a prerequisite for a H.S. diploma. The following competencies must be met by each student: (1) Giving directions, (2) Explaining a process, making a report, or expressing an opinion, (3) Answering the business phone and taking a message, (4) Getting information and assistance

by using the telephone, (5) Demonstrating ability to perform introductions, (6) Interviewing for a job, and (7) Participating in discussion.[8]

As of 1983, high school students in Hawaii must demonstrate mastery of fifteen competencies, one of which is oral communication. Teachers from at least two different courses observe students over a three to four week period and make determinations based upon demonstrated student behavior. The student is expected to communicate orally in situations common to everyday life. These include giving simple directions and answering questions about directions or instructions, expressing personal opinions on a topic and responding to questions about the topic, and describing an object.[9] The teacher/rater answers either "yes" or "no" to each of the nine criteria, six of which apply in situations in which the student gives directions, or instructions to another student, a small group, or a class: (1) States the purpose or main idea, (2) Uses language that is appropriate to the listener(s) and the situation, (3) Organizes ideas in an order that is easy to follow, (4) Provides necessary and relevant details to expand on the main idea, (5) Responds appropriately to feedback, and (6) Adjusts voice to the situation. The remaining criteria apply to situations in which the student expresses personal opinions on a topic: (1) States opinions clearly, (2) Uses language that is appropriate to the feeling/idea expressed, and (3) Presents details that support the opinion.[10]

Interviews. Many assessment programs use an out-of-class situation which is more structured than those occurring in-class. Most of these can be loosely called "interviews." Massachusetts, for example, now uses what they call the "one-on-one approach" in which a trained rater rates a student's performance on specific communication tasks. The student is asked to give oral responses to simulations involving (1) a description, (2) an emergency, (3) a sequence, and (4) a persuasion task. Raters use a four-point scale: 1 (Inadequate), 2 (Minimal), 3 (Adequate), and 4 (Superior); raters rate the student's speaking on four dimensions: delivery, organization, content, and language.[11]

In Hawaii, for students who fail to demonstrate mastery by the procedures outlined earlier, an alternate out-of-class test is available. Students participate in an interview session in groups of two or three in which two raters conduct an informal session with the students for approximately twenty to thirty minutes. Raters give independent judgments on the student's performance by assigning a "Good", "Fair", or "Poor" rating on each of four behaviors: (1) Responds to simple questions and instructions; (2) Gives oral directions; (3) Describes people, places, objects and actions; and (4) Shares information, experiences or opinions.[12]

Part of the Vermont program, referred to earlier, involves the student playing the role of an applicant in a job interview. Similarly, in Glynn County, Georgia, a simulated job interview is conducted with students who fail to demonstrate competency in the primary task which is a simulated public hearing. The interview consists of about twenty-five questions about the student's qualifications, experiences, and interests, including one question calling for a relatively extended narrative response. Students are rated from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest) on nine traits: Social rituals, responsiveness, informativeness, initiative, interpersonal manner, language style, oral expression, speech rate and volume, and gestures.[13]

The Gary, Indiana, School Corporation started an oral proficiency program in 1977 which requires that (1) all elementary students receive a variety of speech activities through the language arts instruction program, (2) all seventh and tenth grade students successfully complete a minimum of one semester of speech instruction, and (3) all students pass an oral proficiency examination prior to H.S. graduation. The examination is in the form of one member of a three-person diagnostic speech team interviewing the student for approximately two minutes by asking his/her opinions about educational and social matters in

the form of open-ended questions. Each member of the diagnostic team gives an independent holistic rating from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest). The two most consistent scores given any student are used to determine a passing or failing score (3 and 4 are passing; 1 and 2 are failing). Although holistic scores are given, the following ten specific speech behaviors are identified as oral proficiency objectives: articulation, pronunciation, word usage, content, sentence structure, verbal utterance, volume, rate, voice quality, and eye contact.[14]

One of the more sophisticated competency tests in oral communication has been developed by Rebecca Rubin for use with college/university students. This test, which takes about thirty minutes per student to administer, measures both speaking and listening, and calls for a number of behaviors, some of them in an interview setting. After the student views a short videotaped lecture which simulates a first day of class, the rater asks the student to respond to statements about college experiences. She/he is assessed on a five-point scale (5 is high; 1 is low) on the following skills: recognize facts, understand suggestions, identify work, summarize, introduce self, obtain information, answer questions, express feelings, use topical order, give directions, describe another's viewpoint, describe differences of opinion.[15]

Also for use on the college/university level, Philip Backlund has devised a means of testing incoming freshmen for purposes of placing them in one of three groups: (1) Those possessing a sufficiently high level of oral communication ability so as to be exempt from any requirement to take a course in basic oral communication, (2) Those who should take a regular course in basic oral communication, and (3) Those who should take some kind of remedial training in oral communication. This test, which is adapted from Rubin's, includes some questions, beginning with four that are designed to gather a brief bit of background information and to put the person at ease. After the student gives a

short talk, five more questions are asked by the rater designed to elicit explanations and descriptions. The rater uses the scale developed and used by the Massachusetts Department of Education.[16]

Public Speech. Some form of an elaborated response is typically required in assessment programs. Although some of these performances are presented to rather small audiences, and in many cases, the student has very little time or opportunity for research and preparation, we will, for the sake of convenience, group all of these kinds of performances under the heading of giving a "public speech". One program using public speech is in Alberta, Canada. Under the direction of the Minister of Education, Alberta tests students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 12 with some tests requiring written responses, others requiring oral responses. Part 2 of the test for grades 3 and 6 asks for: (1) A short (one-minute) impromptu talk. The student examines a four-frame pictorial sequence for 30 seconds and then tells a four-to-six member peer audience about the events depicted in the frames. The teacher evaluates with a scale as the student speaks on audio tape. She/he evaluates it again later with a more extensive rating scale. Part 2 for grades 9 and 12 includes two activities: (1) Students are given 15 minutes to prepare for a three-minute talk presented to four-to-six peers on either Hiking or Walking.[17]

Another assessment program which involves public speaking is in the Westside Community Schools in Omaha, Nebraska. As a graduation requirement, the student communicates orally, so that she/he can be easily understood, an idea of his/her choice to a group of peers and at least one teacher. In order for the student to pass the exam, the observer/teacher must answer "yes" to all seven of these questions: (1) Did the student introduce the main idea, stating the communicative purpose? (2) Did the student give two or more points with supporting material? (3) Did the student use a conclusion to the whole presentation? (4) Did the

student use clear, understandable English? (5) Did the student speak loudly enough to be easily heard? (6) Did the student look at the listeners most of the time? (7) Did the student respond to questions, if he were asked any? The results of the exam is one of the following: (1) Poor, (2) Receive remedial help from the homeroom advisor, (3) Re-evaluated by another advisor, (4) Referred to special services, and (5) Enroll in a speech class.[18]

The primary task in the Glynn County, Georgia test is a simulated public hearing where students are called upon to speak either in support of, or in opposition to, one of three propositions: open campus for lunch; eliminate fund raising in school; and ban students from driving to school. Students are rated by pairs of raters from 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest) on each of eight traits: introduction, position, reasons, organization, conclusion, language style, vocal delivery, and gestures. Students receiving scores of twenty-six or better are certified as competent in oral communication.[19]

Parts of both the Rubin and Backlund tests include a public speech with minimum preparation time available to the students. Rubin uses a five-point scale which includes these competencies: pronunciation, facial expression/tone of voice, speech clarity, persuasiveness, clarity of ideas, expression and defense of ideas, and recognition of non-understanding.[20]

An assessment program is used at the University of Iowa to determine what changes, if any, occur in both students' writing and speaking skills as a result of one semester of instruction in communication skills. The speaking portion of the test involves the student presenting three-minute responses to a number of hypothetical situations. A student may prepare by reading any publications she/he believes will assist in preparing the response. She/he may use note cards with key words or phrases, but detailed notes or written responses are not permitted. The speeches are presented at the University Language Lab at

the end of the second week of the course. Students take an alternate form of the test during the first week of the semester.[21]

A rather unique communication assessment program has been operating at Alverno College in Milwaukee for a number of years. Different levels of public speaking competence are demonstrated by students as they progress through college by means of speaking performances on what and how the student is learning in various classes. Speaking contexts involves General Education courses as well as courses in the major and minor.

Each student's speaking performances are recorded on an individual videotape which is kept in the Assessment Center as an account of student progress. Both professionals and paraprofessionals perform the assessments, the latter for level one assignments, the former for the remaining levels. A continuous training program is used to maint in rater reliability. The Communications Division does a systematic sampling and evaluation of speaking assessments at least every three years.[22]

What Directions Should Future Testing Take?

The experience of recent large scale assessment programs suggest that we direct our efforts in a number of specific directions in future testing.

Defining Communication Competence. Not too many years ago, most speech experts would accept the notion that the competent oral communicator could be defined as a person who was able to show skill in preparing and delivering a public speech. Today, our horizons are broader. But we still suffer from a lack of consensus on how far, and in what directions, we must go on the horizon to properly define our competent communicator. As Rubin points out, this lack of consensus poses a great barrier to establishing the validity of our assessment procedures.[23]

Selecting Kinds of Student Performance(s). The kinds of student performances appropriate for assessing competence depends, of course, upon the nature of the definition. What does seem clear is that despite the ease of rating public speeches, assessment programs which conclude only this kinds of performance are not adequate. Most observers agree that assessment include student performance in a less structured, more informal, give and take situation.

Utilizing Appropriate Criteria. In addition to a wealth of literature identifying various qualities of a good test, we have some recent statements directed toward establishing criteria which are uniquely appropriate for performance tests which assess speaking skill. One of these statements is by Stiggins who identifies characteristics of a good speaking test as those which include: (1) clearly focused, carefully prepared speaking exercises; (2) multiple realistic (real or simulated) speaking contexts; (3) clearly specified (in writing) performance criteria; (4) effective rater training; and (5) a carefully conducted rating process. A committee of the Speech Communication Association developed fifteen criteria for instruments used to assess oral communication. These criteria, developed by Philip M. Backlund, Kenneth L. Brown, Joanne Gurry, and Fred E. Jandt, were endorsed by the Educational Policies Board and the Administrative Committee of the SCA.

Among the suggestions made by the SCA committee are these: (1) assessment instruments and procedures should be free of sexual, cultural, racial, and ethnic context and/or stereotyping; (2) assessment should test skills that are important for various communication settings (e.g., interpersonal, small group, public, and mass communication settings) rather than be limited to one setting; (3) assessment should permit a range of acceptable responses, where such a range is appropriate. Some of the other points from this report pertain more directly to validity or reliability.

Working for Validity. When testing in most subject areas, we expect to note at least some kind of loose relationship between validity and reliability. Ironically, in testing oral communication skill, validity and reliability sometimes tend to work against each other, inasmuch as the more of the more valid informal speech situations we include, the greater the problem of reliability.

Validity is often defined as the extent to which we measure what we claim to measure. So the logical first step in testing validity is to insure that the nature of the assessment is consistent with the definition of communication competence, thus assuring ourselves that an excellent performance on the test guarantees that the student is a competent communicator according to our definition.

A traditional test of validity is to check the test results against other evidence that might be available. In a school setting, this could be done by comparing test results with student performance in a basic oral communication class. The American College Testing Program checked the validity of their speaking test by administering it to persons who rely heavily on speech skill on their job and comparing the test results with employers' rating of the employees as communicators.[27]

Another step toward validity is to make sure that instruments and procedures are free of sexual, cultural, racial, and ethnic content and/or stereotyping. This can be done by having members of cultural subgroups review tests in advance.

The test administrator and the environment in which the test is given can affect validity. Procedures should be standardized and detailed enough so that neither the personality of the administrator nor the test environment affect student responses. The test environment should be comfortable enough to the student that it does not unnecessarily increase or eliminate stress level on the student, thus giving him/her an opportunity to give a representative performance.

Finally, validity depends upon the raters. Raters must assess the specific oral communication behaviors identified as constituting communication competence: no more; no less. This goal can be realized by careful specification and review of performance criteria, careful selection of raters, and thorough rater training.

Working for Reliability. Sometimes, as suggested above, when we attempt to increase validity, we discover an inverse relationship between increasing validity and increasing reliability. But in other instances, increasing validity shows a positive correlation with increased reliability. For example, careful control of the test administration and the environment in which it occurs will promote reliability.

Another way in which reliability and validity can be increased simultaneously is by number: increasing the number of tasks the student completes; increasing the number of times the student is tested; and increasing the number of raters. Feasibility dictates that we keep all numbers as small as possible and still get the job done at a reasonable level of reliability.

The primary key to reliability is the training and re-training (calibrating) of the raters. As Rubin says, "When raters are exposed to speech samples and share their scores publicly, they can calibrate themselves as a group and come to apply scoring criteria in a consistent and parallel fashion."[28] The programs in Hawaii, Massachusetts, and Alverno College all use training programs for raters with calibration tapes to check themselves periodically after the original training.

Conclusion. Although competency testing in oral communication is still in its infancy, we have to be encouraged by some of the programs now under way. We have hoped that one positive result of assessment programs would be the proper inclusion of more speech education in school curricula, taught by qualified teachers. After all, testing is an integral part of the teaching/learning process.

Unless speech has a definite place in the curriculum, with testing as a natural outcome, there is danger that it will be done by non-speech personnel who may regard the job as just another piece of bureaucratically-inspired paper work to be done as quickly and as painlessly as possible for the sake of fulfilling the letter of the law, but not necessarily the spirit. Secondary teachers, in particular, tend to regard themselves as teachers of a given subject area and often do not shift easily into roles which take them out of their area of expertise.

The assessment of oral communication skills is finally coming of age. Performance testing is gaining recognition as a legitimate form. Recent experience shows that we can assess with validity and reliability. We should continue our efforts.

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